Elijah Lovejoy

Nellie Mogge
Oregon High School, Oregon
Teacher: Sara Werckle

In the nineteenth century, the idea of slavery was accepted by many and rejected by few. People who rejected slavery stood out in shaping the ideas of later generations. Elijah Lovejoy was one anti-slavery man who expressed his ideas through journalism. Though his ideas were not always pleasing for the slaveholders and pro-slavery men to hear, that did not stop him from speaking his mind through his right to freedom to the press. Lovejoy said, "By the help of God, I will stand. I know I am but one and you are many . . . but I shall die at my post, for I cannot and will not forsake it." At the time, very few embraced his ideas, but he greatly affected later generations.

Lovejoy was born in Albion, Maine, in 1802. Both of his parents thought it was important for him to be well educated, especially on religion. In 1826, he moved west. He wanted to spread New England morals to a region, which, he thought, needed some religious direction. In 1832, he underwent a religious conversion and felt God's call of service to change the world. His new life consisted of delivering sermons in St. Louis and editing of the new "reform newspaper," the *Observer*. "He would dedicate his life, he resolved, to spread the word of God among these Westerners," wrote the historian Anthony John Scott. The pages of the *Observer* published ideas about Christian politics, diffusion of religious intelligence, and saving souls. The views of Lovejoy in his writings portrayed slavery as a "national sin" and a "cruel form of human oppression." Alton citizens were angry.

Slaveholders and pro-slavery men in Missouri felt threatened by Lovejoy because he was challenging the Roman Catholic Church, which was a lawful and important instition to them. The result of their growing anger Lovejoy was violence. In 1836, Lovejoy wrote about a violent mob that assaulted a free African American riverboat worker, Francis McIntosh. A mob took McIntosh to the outskirts of town, chained him to a tree, set kindling around him, and burned him to death. McIntosh cried out in agony and begged to be shot and put out of his misery, but no man performed this act of mercy.

Lovejoy grew extremely "strident against slavery" in his editorials after seeing this horrible act of violence. Southerners and slaveholders hated him because of his writings on the mob's attacks. In 1836, his press was destroyed by an angry mob. Lovejoy realized that St. Louis was not a safe place for him to live at this time; hence in 1836, he moved to Alton, Illinois to continue publishing his ideas. Most of the Alton population was not opposed to Lovejoy's arrival in Alton, as along as Altonians were sure there would not be controversy in their town, as had occurred in St. Louis. At a town meeting Lovejoy told the people of Alton that he would not publish as much about slavery, but, if he thought something needed to be said including slavery, he would write about it. The citizens of Alton felt betrayed when throughout the first year, the anti-slavery publications in the *Observer* increased. In October, a meeting was held in Alton for men with antislavery views, where Lovejoy discussed man's freedoms and liberties. This address has been "hailed as one of the most moving speeches" in America's history supporting the freedoms and rights of the Constitution. Lovejoy stated in his address, "I know that I have the right to speak and publish my sentiments . . . This right was given to me by my Maker; and it is solemnly guaranteed to me by the Constitution of the United

States and of this state. You come together for the purpose of driving out a confessedly innocent man, for no cause but that he dares to think and speak his conscience and his God distaste." Lovejoy also stated, "there is no way to escape the mob, but to abandon the path of duty; and that, God helping me, I will never do."

After hearing his address, citizens forced Lovejoy to leave Alton and cease publication of the *Observer* immediately, but he did not follow their request. On the night of November 7, 1837, Lovejoy and a few of his supporters decided instead to secretly get the fourth press that arrived by riverboat and take it to the Godfrey and Gilman warehouse to be stored and guarded. Word spread the next day about the press. An angry mob formed outside of the warehouse. It was armed with weapons and demanded the destruction of the press. When the men inside refused the mob's request, the mob acted violently. It went from simple rock throwing to setting fire to the entire warehouse. In the chaos, Lovejoy stepped out of the building and as he did, he was shot in the chest several times. He was killed almost instantly. "For a moment in 1837, Alton Illinois was the scene of a battle for freedom that was felt across the nation", according to one web site. Lovejoy was buried two days latter in a field near his home. There were few mourners in attendance, but there would be more in later generations.

Lovejoy's abolitionism and his publications of those ideas were rejected in the areas that he expressed them. Yet amidst all of the resistance, Lovejoy did not back down. "A weaker man than Lovejoy would have shut up shop and left town," according to historian Scott. He did not greatly influence the people in St. Louis and Alton at the time, but he definitely played a big part in the shaping of the minds of later generations. Thomas Dimmock stated, "But in his spirit, 'the vital spark of heavenly flame' that made

him what he was, still lives and breathes and burns—not only here among us today, but wherever his story has been told the wide world over. And so it must always be--as long as unselfish a heroic manhood is recognized and appreciated on this earth." [From Doug Dammon, "Eliijah Lovejoy" (Sept. 23, 2004); Don J. Huber, *Eliijah Parish Lovejoy "A Martyr on the Alter of American Liberty"*, <http://www.altonweb.com/history/lovejoy/index.html> (Dec. 14, 2004); and Anthony John Scott, *Hard Trials on My Way, Slavery, and the Struggle Against It 1800-1880*.]